

# The County Press

## Divers recover doctor's body from Lake Nepessing

By Phil Foley  
Staff Writer

ELBA TWP. -- Police divers from five communities found the body of a Lapeer doctor just before 2 p.m. Tuesday following an intensive three-day search of Lake Nepessing.

Antoun Aftimos, M.D., 42, disappeared beneath the waters of Lake Nepessing during a family outing Sunday afternoon. Aftimos maintained a practice on Suncrest Drive in Lapeer.

Lapeer County Sheriff's Dept. Undersheriff Robert Rapson said Aftimos' body was found in about 25 feet of water about 200 yards offshore of the Castaways restaurant northeast of an area known locally as the sunken island. Rapson said the county medical examiner was on his way to the scene to identify the body.

Although one Flint area television station has publicized the name of the victim and at least one Lapeer area church announced the name during services Sunday, the Lapeer County Sheriff's Dept. declined to confirm or deny that until late Tuesday, citing the family's desire not to release the name until absolutely necessary, and the fact that deputies have not recovered a body and confirmed its identity.

The process of recovering Aftimos' body was hampered by heavy weeds and murky water in parts of Lake Nepessing. "It's physically demanding work," said Rapson. He said five and six diver teams had searched the lake in 45-minute shifts during daylight hours since the man went missing.

The sheriff's dive team has been searching Lake Nepessing since Aftimos' family called Central Dispatch at 1:14 p.m. Sunday to report he'd gone missing while swimming off of a rented pontoon boat with a light canopy on the lake. Initial search efforts, said Rapson, were hampered because the family was somewhat disoriented.

Lake Monday the Lapeer County Sheriff's Dept. asked anyone who had seen the family's 21-foot pontoon boat Sunday afternoon to help pinpoint the boat's location at the time of the mishap. In an automated call made to residents on the south end of the lake, the "My Child Is Missing" service described the victim as a 5-foot-9, 180-pound, balding, white man with short dark hair.

Sheriff's divers first had a quarter-mile long, 200-yard wide search area, but that was eventually narrowed down to a five- or six-acre area with the help of people calling in. Rapson said witnesses gave three different locations for the boat at first.

Lapeer Sheriff's divers were joined Sunday by dive teams for Oakland and Sanilac counties, and on Tuesday divers with the Oxford Police Dept. and the Saginaw Sheriff's Dept. joined in the search.

Rapson said it was exhausting work, with divers pulling through heavily weeded areas with near zero visibility.

He said an Oakland County Sheriff's helicopter flew search patterns over the lake for more than 45 minutes without success Monday. He added that the Lapeer and Oakland county dive teams towed sonar units through the 414-acre lake, but initially located only old dive ladders and similar items.

Sheriff's Deputy Sgt. Andy Engster said Monday it appeared Aftimos jumped from the pontoon boat when his four children, who were all wearing life jackets, began to drift away.

Rapson said investigators have speculated the doctor may have become exhausted after getting entangled in dense weeds in the lake. Aftimos' father-in-law jumped in after him when he began to show signs of distress, but lost sight of him

"From what we gather, he was not uncomfortable in the water," said Rapson. "Water is unforgiving," said Rapson. "Water only knows one thing -- buoyancy. If you're buoyant you float, if not ..."

Divers said they had 25-foot visibility when they first began searching the lake Sunday afternoon. An overnight rainstorm, they said, dropped visibility in the water down to five to 10 feet Monday. One diver said weeds in some parts of the lake have wrist-thick stalks at the bottom.

At first, said Rapson, "we made a run at a cold-water recovery." He said the water at the bottom of the lake, which averages about 25 feet in depth, hovers in the 50-degree range. Drowning victims have been known to be revived for up to an hour after being in frigid waters.

However, as the search dragged on, it became clear it was a recovery operation. Sheriff's divers put their search on hold about 9 p.m. Sunday night as the light failed, and they were back in the water by 8 a.m. Monday.

The parking lot at the Castaways was unusually full Monday, but instead of the restaurant's usual lunch crowd it was sheriff's vehicles, the Elba Township Fire Dept. and a Lapeer County EMS crew. There were also the vehicles of distraught family members and friends.

One Elba Township fire fighter said he couldn't remember anyone ever

drowning in the lake before, while another said someone had drowned in the adjacent Long Lake 10 -12 years ago.

Rapson said the last fatality in the lake was when three people died in a plane crash in 1980. He said another man died on the lake in the late 1970s after two snowmobiles went through the ice.

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